Wilfrid Knapp

Founding Fellow of St Catherine's, Oxford whose studies on the Middle East did much to build up the college

Wilfrid Knapp was a leading figure in the foundation of what is still Oxford University's newest undergraduate college, St Catherine's, from 1962, helping to build it up into one of the university's largest colleges.

In his own scholarship he did much to open up study on the increasingly important geopolitics of the Middle East and North Africa and in doing so he attracted many high calibre students to St Catherine's, further establishing the college's reputation.

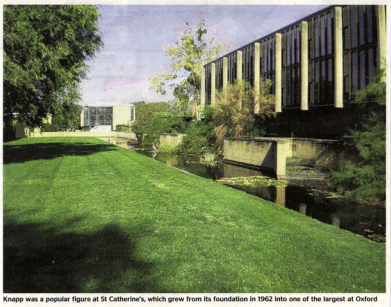
As an academic he embodied the best traditional qualities of an Oxford tutor. In the 65-plus years in which he was associated with St Catherine's College his many roles included senior tutor and dean, much sought after supervisor of graduate students and highly successful fundraiser.

Wilfrid Knapp was born in Harrow, Middlesex, in 1924 and grew up in Sipson — a village that later found itself on the edge of Heathrow airport — where his father was headmaster at Sipson Primary School.

He went up to New College, Oxford, as an undergraduate in 1942 to study philosophy, politics and economics. His studies were interrupted when he joined the RAF Photographic Unit in 1943. After the war he returned to New College and finished his PPE degree in 1947. He then won a Kordia scholarship and studied in Paris for a year at the Sorbonne, returning to New College as a lecturer in 1949.

In 1950 Knapp had seen a notice inviting applications for the position of tutor in politics at St Catherine's Society. He sought advice from his two New College tutors, Alan Bullock and Isaiah Berlin, and on receiving their encouragement he slipped in a last-minute application. Victor Brook, Censor of St Catherine's Society, was perplexed and telephoned his referees to ask whether he should take seriously so late an application, explaining that he had already made a shortlist and a timetable for interviews. He was given a strong affirmative in reply. With two candidates left under consideration, Brook introduced an entirely new consideration. Would they be interested in addition to take on the post of bursar, with responsibility for overseeing the provision of meals? The second candidate was irate: he had applied for the post of tutor in politics and he had no wish to be become chief cook and bottle-washer. Knapp's position was different. He had a great deal more confidence in his ability to supervise catering than in his historical research. And after four years of intermittent courtship he wanted to marry. The payment offered for this extra task was 10 per cent of the main stipend, so he accepted.

When Brook retired in 1951, Bullock was seen by some as a possible candidate for the succession. While Bullock, at New College, had obvious qualities as a Fellow and tutor in history for seven years, he was not sure that he wanted to become Censor of St Catherine's. He later said that Knapp persuaded him to let his name go forward. Knapp remembered: "Undoubtedly I failed up St Catherine's, where I was happy teaching and where I enjoyed the vigour and diversity of the undergraduates." Bullock, with Knapp as one of his important lieutenants, went on to become founding Master of St Catherine's College, which opened in 1962.



Knapp was a popular figure at St Catherine's, which grew from its foundation in 1962 into one of the largest at Oxford

Meanwhile, Knapp's own studies gathered an increasingly international dimension. This had not been his original plan. He was fluent in French and it had been his intention to continue his research into the life and career of the French historian and publicist Jules Michelet. But the Cold War got in the way. He became preoccupied with international politics, to the point at which he confessed to Bullock that he wanted to write a survey of recent developments in this area.

Knapp carved out a position for himself in that domain, especially in relation to the Middle East, and students were attracted to St Catherine's as a result. From his initial interest in France, Knapp extended his resources to take in French-speaking North Africa, and the lands bordering the Mediterranean, and from there it was a natural progression to the Middle East, an area where he rapidly became an acknowledged expert, with many friends in Arab lands, Iran and Israel.

His scholarly work progressed in tandem with his exploration — his books covered a wide range from *Unity and Nationalism in Europe since 1945* (1969), through to *North West Africa: A Political and Economic Survey* (with Nevill Barbour), the latter reaching third edition in 1977. His Middle Eastern interests were further stimulated by his work with Robert Mabro, who had had the idea of setting up an annual Oxford energy seminar. An essential characteristic of the seminar was that there should be parity between participants and eminent speakers from oil-producing and oil-consuming countries.

Mabro and Knapp travelled to Vienna where they met Ali Jaidah and Ali Attiga, Secretary-Generals of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) and the Organisation of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (Oapec), and worked out an agreement in 1979 between their organisations and the college. More than 30 years later the seminar still attracts a large international following.

New heads of college, new Fellows and new students were a source of new friendships for him throughout his life. His apparently boundless open-mindedness could indeed be an irritant for those who wanted the college to be more cautious, or more hidebound. But he saw disagreements as an opportunity for reconciliation, not as a chance for a feud, and even those who did not share his diverse enthusiasms found it difficult to be cross with him for long.

What accompanied all his social interactions was his sense of the opportunities afforded by conviviality, enhanced by the care and attention to detail apparent in any kind of hospitality for which he was responsible. He and his wife Pat made their home in Hilltop Road a haven for men and women from all countries, welcomed with a warmth beyond artifice to a place they had made together so comfortable and gracious. Often Knapp himself created the dishes from the international recipes he picked up on his travels.

Knapp was devoted to the college of which he had been a founding Fellow; but far from being resistant to change, he was eager to encourage and indeed to adapt to the innovation of successive generations. He enjoyed considerable international success in attracting funds to the college so that St Catherine's could compete as an academic institution with the older colleges. In all his years at St Catherine's he maintained a great zest for life, bringing energy, verve and style.

He retired from St Catherine's in 1992 but remained an emeritus professor until his death.

On his retirement, the late Lady Bullock said: "I will leave you with a characteristic vignette of him as he cycles at breakneck speed down Manor Road, no hands on the handlebars, his coat tails flying as he turns to wave at a friend passing by. It is a cold day, but he is wearing only a jacket and no gloves, as though the very warmth of his heart will keep the elements at bay."

Wilfrid Knapp, academic, was born on December 4, 1924. He died on March 30, 2011, aged 86

Lives remembered

Professor John Grenville

Anthony Joseph, chairman, Birmingham branch of the Jewish Historical Society of England, writes: After the appointment of Professor John Grenville (obituary, April 7) to the Chair of Modern History at Birmingham University (in 1969), he became an enthusiastic and extremely helpful source of support and advice for the Birmingham branch of the Jewish Historical Society of England. I recall in particular a masterly analysis he shared with us about viewing events in modern history through the lenses of newspaper reporting from different countries. An event of international significance as reported in different countries could offer totally different perspectives on the importance and impact of the said event. Although this idea is intuitive, and perhaps a simple concept to grasp, it was John Grenville's expert handling of the theme that was so useful.

He also gave an instructive account which set his own odyssey into an historical perspective, including the change of his name from Gruchauser to Grenville.

In 1982 the Jewish Historical Society of England revived a practice it had not followed for about 80 years: holding an annual main meeting in one or other setting out of its usual London venue. Birmingham was chosen for the first of these events and Professor Grenville was invited to chair the meeting. It was a memorable occasion and his skilled dealing with logistics, speakers and question and answer sessions was instrumental to its resounding success.

John Steane

Paul Hill writes: As a teaching colleague at Merchant Taylors' School, Northwood, I would like to reiterate the comments concerning the influence and infectious good humour of John Steane on both pupils and staff.

In his obituary (March 25) I noted a reference to him being housemaster of Walter House. As the next housemaster of Walter House I was very aware that the Walter was an O.M.T. who was the founder and first editor of *The Times* in 1785. Originally called *The Daily Universal Register*, it became *The Times* in 1788.

John is remembered affectionately by so many pupils and colleagues.

William Castell writes: I am indebted to John Steane because, by playing records in the lunch hour during my last year (1953) at Merchant Taylors', he introduced me to the enjoyment of classical music, which has given me so much pleasure over the ensuing years.

Sir Simon Milton

Judge Justin Philips writes: Simon's (obituary, April 13) late father, Clive, was rescued from the Nazis on a kindertransport. Indeed, he donated a stained glass window to Hendon Reform Synagogue in memory of his family murdered in the Shoah. Both Clive and Simon's careers pay tribute to what immigrants and their children can achieve in the United Kingdom.

If you would like to add a personal view or recollection to a published obituary, you can send your contribution by post to Times Obituaries, 3 Thomas More Square, London E98 1TT, or by e-mail to **tributes@thetimes.co.uk**